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AUTHOR(S):

Nutter, Felicia B.

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Reports from the Field

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GOMBE, TANZANIA

RESPIRATORY DISEASE CLAIMS THE LIVES OF AT LEAST SEVEN GOMBE CHIMPS

Felicia B. Nutter

*Department of Companion Animal
& Special Species Medicine
College of Veterinary Medicine
North Carolina State University*

Many of you have read Dr. Jane Goodall's recent article on the birth of twins (a male named Roots and a female named Shoots) to Rafiki, a member of Gombe's Mitumba community. Sadly, on April 2 researchers at Gombe saw Shoots being carried by an unrelated adolescent female, with no sign of Rafiki or Roots nearby. Such an observation is often a clue that the mother is dead or severely debilitated, so concerned researchers quickly organized a search. Rafiki's body was found shortly thereafter, and Roots is presumed dead as well, though he has not been located. Thus Gombe staff learned that the Mitumba community might be threatened by an unknown pathogen.

The Kigoma District Veterinary Officer, Dr. Leonard Msengi, performed a post-mortem examination of Rafiki and also observed several group members, noting difficulty breathing, coughing, and nasal discharge in some chimps. He suspected a viral upper respiratory infection, with possible secondary bacterial infection resulting in pneumonia. He recommended a course of penicillin and trimethoprim-sulfa antibiotics for all Mitumba chimps that could be located.

It is currently the height of the rainy season at Gombe, a time of year when

humans and animals alike face colder temperatures and pervasive dampness. Cold and flu-like symptoms are common, but not usually fatal. In the days following Rafiki's death, the Gombe staff searched for missing individuals. Unfortunately, within a week six other bodies were identified. Many group members remain unaccounted for, including most of the adult males. The researchers have been working diligently to administer appropriate doses of antibiotics (hidden in bananas) to the chimps that can be found. So far their efforts seem to be paying off, as there have been no further deaths in treated animals. There has also been no evidence of spread to the neighboring Kasakela community.

These problems are not new, and are not unique to Gombe. The *Pan Africa Newsletter* has carried reports of recent epidemics in chimpanzees at Tai Forest and Mahale Mountains. Gombe also suffered another major outbreak of presumptive respiratory disease in 1987, and a paralytic disease (probably poliomyelitis) in 1966. Please see previous issues of PAN for these discussions.

Because the outbreak is so recent, the infectious agent and potential sources of the pathogen have not yet been identified. The climate, terrain, and size of the chimps' home range make it difficult to find bodies in time to collect appropriate tissue samples, but the scientists are persevering. We hope to work with colleagues at Tanzanian National Parks to clarify the causes of the outbreak, and to prevent such tragedies in the future if possible.

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